

Vernon Haywood Tuskegee Airman

Series: Aviation



Not everyone has the right stuff to be a fighter pilot. It takes determination, courage, keen eyesight, quick reflexes, and the ability to anticipate where the enemy will be and how to outmaneuver him. A group of World War II African American fighter pilots had what it takes, and more. They possessed the self-confidence to overlook other people's doubts, the patience to deal with prejudice, and the perseverance to carry out their responsibilities despite the lack of acceptance by whites.

The Ninety-ninth Pursuit Squadron of the United States Army Air Corps, better known as the Tuskegee Airmen, was the first African American military flying unit. The airmen got their name from Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, where they trained. The Tuskegee Airmen joined with three other all-black fighter squadrons to form the 332nd Fighter Group. The 332nd flew more than 15,000 sorties, destroyed more than 250 enemy planes, and never lost a bomber it escorted in combat. The success of this group helped pave the way for the integration of the armed forces in 1948.

Vernon Haywood of Raleigh was a Tuskegee Airman. He was born on October 24, 1920. Haywood became interested in aviation at an early age. One night when he was playing in his backyard, a dirigible, or blimp, lit up the sky as it passed overhead. The strange aircraft fascinated the young boy. "From that moment on, I sort of got the [aviation] bug," Haywood recalled in an interview many years later.

Haywood graduated from high school in 1938 and then attended Hampton Institute in Virginia. In the late 1930s, the federal government established the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Hampton and six other black colleges. Haywood enrolled in the program and took flying lessons in addition to his college courses.

In 1941 Haywood went to Tuskegee Army Air Field for fighter pilot training. He then served fifteen months as an Army Air Corps fighter pilot in the Mediterranean. He flew P-39s, P-41s, and P-51s on missions escorting B-17 and B-24 bombers to their targets. Haywood rose through the ranks and was made commander of the 302nd Fighter Squadron. He flew 356 combat hours in 70 missions before returning to the states in 1945.

After President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 integrating the military, Haywood became one of the first African American aviation instructors in the armed forces. In 1949 he was assigned to Williams Air Force Base in Arizona, where he taught for four years. After several tours of duty in the Far East, he returned to Arizona in 1966. There he commanded the 4454th Fighter Squadron, flying F-4 phantom jets. In October 1971 Colonel Haywood retired after flying more than 6,000 hours in fighter airplanes. As an active member of the Tuskegee Airmen in Tucson, Arizona, he spoke to civic and school groups about his experiences. Vernon Haywood died in April 2003.